SOME ASPECTS OF CASTE IN BENGAL[1]

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CASTE has always been of interest to students of Indian history and civilization. While the interest was formerly more in the direction of origin, the emphasis has apparently shifted in modern times to a study of its contemporary functions. In the Presidential Address to the Section on Anthropology and Archaeology of the Indian Science Congress in 1957, M. N. Srinivas showed how caste has not only not been weakened by forces of modernization in India, but has, on the contrary, been fortified, so that it plays a significant role even in the determination of the character of democratic institutions in the country.[2]

Whether one should limit one's field of observation to one particular field or allow comparisons to be made in other fields also, is a question which can be legitimately raised in this connection. For, it is well known that caste derives its strength not merely from the power structure of society, but also from its association with a particular form of organization in the economic as well as the religious life of the country. Occupations are ranked into high and low, and so are various forms of religious beliefs and practices. And thus various shades of philosophy and ways of life have been allowed to coexist in apparent avoidance of conflict with one another. The question may legitimately be raised as to what is happening in the other aspects of caste's many sided organization.

With this end in view, it may be profitable for us to examine the case of a state like Bengal where the ancient ways of life have been subjected to more profound alteration than in many other parts of India. The causes which have led to this special development have been both accidental and intentional. British commerce found a favorable roosting place in Bengal at the end of the seventeenth century, while about a century or more afterwards, awakened and indigenous Indian leadership recognized the imperative necessity of "modernization"; as a result, wave after wave of social reform arose and brought about significant changes in the cultural as well as the social life of the province. If the forces of change have affected Bengal's life in one particular manner, or have also set up contrary forces of diminishing strength in their train, it may not be unreasonable to expect that similar forces may bring about comparable results in other linguistic or cultural provinces of India, if the forces happen to be similar to those encountered in the case chosen for our present study.

Birbhum is a district in West Bengal which has retained its predominantly rural character. In the heart of this rice growing country lies the village of Jajigram with a population of 2160 individuals. The name of the village is derived from *yājana*, *yajña*, Vedic 'fire sacrifice,' and *grām*, 'village'; and the fact that the place has a large Brahman population is probably the result of its ancient historical origin when a colony of Brahmans took up residence in this place. There are, altogether, twenty-eight castes in residence here, and the following table presents the number, traditional occupation, as well as actual occupation followed by each of these castes. It may be pointed out

that the census presented below was the result of a local social worker's survey undertaken in the year 1947.[3]

GROUP A: CASTES FROM WHOM WATER IS NOT ACCEPTED BY BRAHMANS

Name	No. of Families	Individuals	Traditional Occupation	Actual Occupation
Muci	65	325	Tanning, shoemaking	Landless labor
Bhuĩmāli	40	150	Sweeping, cleaning	T.O.;[4] landless labor; 2 peasant proprietors
Phulmāli	7	25	Gardening, supplying flowers for religious offering	Landless labor
Rājbamśi	10	35	Boatmen and agricultural labor	Landless labor
Bhaṛ	12	35	Mfg. of chapped rice, labor	T.O.
Māl	80	400	Agricultural labor	T.O.
Konāi	15	350	do.	T.O.
Bāuri	1	5	do.	T.O.
Ḍom	5	20	Working in bamboo (basket weaving)	T.O.
Koṛā Sāntāl	25	65	Digging earth, labor	T.O.
Jele	11	55	Fishing	T.O., 2 peasant proprietors
Dhobā	2	10	Washing clothes	T.O.

GROUP B: CASTES FROM WHOM WATER IS ACCEPTED BY BRAHMANS

Name	No. of Families	Individuals	Traditional Occupation	Actual Occupation
Goālā	8	25	Milk trade and cow-keeping	T.O. and farming
Sadgop	5	10	Farming	Landless labor
Kumor	4	10	Mfg. Pottery	T.O.
Kāmār	6	20	Blacksmithery	T.O.
Chutār	1	5	Carpentry	T.O.
Nāpit	7	50	Shaving and hair-cutting	T.O.
Bene	2	5	Trading in spices	Trade and farming
Bārai	40	200	Cultivation of betel vine	T.O.; 2 grocers, 3 unskilled physicians
Bhāt	2	10	?	Clerical jobs
Kāyastha	28	120	Clerical work	Farming, clerical job, 2 physicians, some unemployed

GROUP C: HIGH CASTES

Name	No. of Families	Individuals	Traditional Occupation	Actual Occupation
Rājpūt	4	15	Soldiers	Landless labor
Chatri	6	15	Soldiers	Farming, clerical work
Brahman	30	150	Priestcraft, teaching, etc.	Farming, clerical job, 1 physician, some unemployed
Grahācārya (Brahman)	1	5	Astrology	T.O.
Vaidya	12	50	Physician	Farming, physicians, clerical job, also unemployed
Bairāgī (Vaiṣṇava mendicant)	5	15	Religious mendicancy	T.O., 1 in farming

It is observed in the table that sixty-eight percent of the population belongs to the section from whom water is found unacceptable by "upper" castes like Brahman or Vaidya. Leather workers have mostly lost their hereditary occupation, because hides and skins have, for many years past, formed an important collection from the villages of India for purposes of export. They have gradually drifted towards agriculture, and form a fair proportion of the landless labor corps of the village. Bamboo workers, i.e., basket-weavers, and fishermen alone have been able to retain their own profession; among the last, two have become peasants owning land.

Among the "clean Śūdras," i.e., those farming and artisan castes from whom water is acceptable to Brahmans, the change from traditional occupation has been less marked in character. These Śūdras constitute altogether 22.6 percent of the total population. We find that milkmen have also taken to agriculture, while one member of the blacksmith caste has joined clerical service. The comparatively more prosperous cultivators of betel vine, namely Bārai, are, by and large, farmers; while two of them trade in grocery, three are physicians, and some are unemployed. The Kāyasthas form, in this group, an educated and professional class; while there is also some dependence among them upon cultivation through hired laborers. The Brahman (including Grahācārya, astrologer) and Vaidya, who claim equal status with the Brahman in society, are both dependent on farming through hired laborers, or earn their livelihood through professions like clerical service, teaching etc., or are unemployed. They altogether constitute about nine percent of the total.

The inhabitants of the village, therefore, depend largely on agriculture, even though the more favored ones educationally may supplement their income through one or other of the higher professions.

Although the village has succeeded in retaining its predominantly rural character, yet there has taken place a considerable alteration in the economic relationship which binds together its permanent and floating population. At one time, part of the payment due for the annual services of artisans like carpenters, potters, etc. used to be in terms of a share of the annual harvest, while services like those of barbers or washermen were recompensed by the grant of small areas of service land. These have now

CAMĀR AND MUCI: LEATHER WORKING

	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population	96,391 (only Camār)	533,131	564,879	564,682
Earning members		238,058	244,145	217,366
Percentage of literates	3.19	2.97	3.11	4.52
Percentage in:				
traditional occupation	23.26	33.77	23.94	24.59
agriculture	33.47	32.33	28.60	32.88
industries		37.06	42.84	43.93
higher professions		0.254	0.449	1.071

BĀGDI OR BYAGRA KṢATRIYA: AGRICULTURE AND FISHING

	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population	703,147	847,228	886,821	987,315
Earning members		392,472	371,477	366,455
Percentage of literacy	1.57	1.91	2.13	1.92
Percentage in:				
traditional occupation	70.13	71.28	42.28(?)	69.79
agriculture		73.41	68.66	81.74
industries		10.05	9.23	5.03
higher professions		0.247	0.355	1.171

GOĀLĀ: COW KEEPING AND MILK TRADE

	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population	494,699	583,790	582,597	599,281
Earning members		251,829	239,429	217,438
Percentage of literacy	6.33	7.68	10.57	10.17
Percentage in:				
traditional occupation	41.45	31.39	21.30	24.77
agriculture		41.00	42.21	37.49
industries		6.47	7.43	7.28
higher professions		1.650	1.873	5.421

VAIDYA: MEDICINE

	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population	31,357	88,298	102,870	110,739
Earning members		21,133	24,114	26,292
Percentage of literacy	45.62	53.21	57.52	51.79
Percentage in:				
traditional occupation	36.10	20.11	15.02	18.80
agriculture		7.163	12.418	6.04
industries		2.13	1.22	1.85
higher professions		54.663	46.811	49.40

	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population	1,019,348	1,191,867	1,314,430	1,456,180
Earning members		400,064	425,173	417,157
Percentage of literacy	35.84	39.85	43.15	37.28
Percentage in:				
traditional occupation	33.54	21.79	14.57	16.57
agriculture		19.39	22.63	15.38
industries		2.92	3.57	4.50
higher professions		43.71	34.96	30.76

A comparison of the tables will indicate that, on the whole, changes have taken place in two directions among various castes. Artisan castes like Kumor (potter), Kāmār (blacksmith), or Camār-Muci (tanner and leather worker) have drifted either towards agricultural labor, or skilled labor in industries other than their traditional one. The percentage of literacy among them has tended to remain low, at a lower level than the average for all castes in Bengal. Castes like the Byagra Kṣatriya (formerly recorded as Bāgdi), whose traditional occupation was labor in the fields, have retained it to an appreciable extent; and their percentage of literacy has also tended to remain at a considerably low level, lower than that of the average for artisan castes, for example. In the case of castes like Brahman or Vaidya, the departure from traditional occupation has been very high indeed; while there has been a corresponding concentration, not in agriculture or industries, but in "higher professions," like medicine, law, office work of various kinds, or landowning or land management. Percentages of literacy are naturally higher in comparison with the country's average.

Furthermore, it is of interest to note that figures for employment in traditional occupations have been steadily reduced in the case of those castes referred to in the last portion of the above paragraph. Thus, the decline has been as follows:

Percentage of earning members engaged in traditional occupations	1901	1911	1921	1931
Brahman	33.54	21.79	14.57	16.57
Vaidya	36.10	20.11	15.02	18.80

It is interesting that here, too, castes have remained endogamous; or, in other words, sameness of occupation, whether in the learned professions or agriculture, has not tended in any way to break down the barriers of endogamy. Some investigation along this line has recently been conducted among two "upper" and two "lower" castes in West Bengal under the direction of Iravati Karve, which tends to show that rules of marriage have remained practically unaltered in the course of at least three generations. One will naturally await with interest the publication of the results of this very significant piece of investigation.

There is thus some amount of evidence to indicate that changes in occupation have been widespread in the state of West Bengal, but this has not been attended by an alter-

ation of the rules of endogamy to any appreciable extent. Should that be taken to mean that there has been no change in the internal affairs of caste at all?

For this purpose, let us turn once more to the work of Priti Mitra referred to above. After an analysis of census figures, Mitra proceeded to investigate some of the caste organizations separately. It appears that from about the beginning of the present century, when castes and their ranks began to be recorded in census returns, many organizations along modern lines have also been established in India to take charge of a few of the interests associated with caste. Srinivas noted in his presidential address referred to above that some of these go back to about the middle of the last century; but, by and large, many were established, or became particularly active, from the census of 1901 onwards.

At least, this has been so in the case of West Bengal, where associations were formed at or near the latter event by castes like the Yogī, Sadgop, Gandhabaṇik, Subarṇabaṇik, Namaḥśūdra, Kāyastha, Vaidya or Brahman. These organizations appear to possess very few functions in the ordinary life of their members. But when there is some question of rank involved, popular enthusiasm can be raised high, and even made to serve some purposes of internal social reform. In the case of castes enjoying a high rank, like the Brahman, Vaidya, or Kāyastha, the specific organizations do not ever seem to have reached any high point of activity.

The organizations of the Yogī, a "clean" caste of weavers, and of the Namaḥśūdras, who are considered very low in the social scale, and whose traditional occupation happens to be agriculture and the plying of boats, can be taken up for consideration, on the basis of Priti Mitra's work.[6]

An author named Radhagovinda Nath presented a newly published book entitled *Baṅgīyā Yogī Jāti* 'The Yogi Caste of Bengal' to the Census Commissioner before the census of 1911. In the journal founded by the caste organization, entitled *Yogī Sakhā* 'Friend of the Yogi,' some of the articles published were as follows: "[Our] Historical Past," "The Historical Position of the Yogī Caste," "Ray of Light," "Who Are We?", and "Downfall and its Prevention."

During the census of 1921, a claim was made by members of the priestly section of the Yogī that they should be enumerated as Brahmans. It should be noted that the Yogīs had priests belonging to their own caste. In 1931, the entire Yogī caste claimed the status of Brahmanhood. At an annual conference, a resolution was adopted that the Yogī should wear the sacred thread characteristic of Brahmans in Bengal. Articles on the subject were published in the *Yogī Sakhā* of 1318, 1320, 1321, 1328 B.S., corresponding to 1911 onwards. These bore titles like "The Ritual of Wearing the Sacred Thread," "Popularity of the Sacred Thread," etc. It was also suggested in one of these articles that the priestly section of the caste should educate themselves in the proper manner, so that they could be truly worthy of their profession.

It is significant that some articles published in the same journal advocated the liquidation of endogamous subdivisions within the caste. Child marriage was condemned, and articles were published in order to promote women's interests; for, in the matter of literacy, women lagged far behind men belonging to the caste. Such articles bore titles like the following: "Our Duty Towards Women," "Female Education," "An Appeal to Our Sisters," "Will Not Women Grow Up?" and "Women's Problems." The caste seems to have been divided in its mind on the question of the marriage of widows; a few widow remarriages were performed in spite of the opposition of the older, more conservative section.